Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Today is a special day - we get to celebrate 20 years of God's faithfulness to us as a church, and his provision of this building. The psalmist says, 'Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.' And we know that neither the church, nor this building are perfect, but God is our builder and we're grateful for it.

And because today is special, we're taking a break from Romans - and instead we're going to consider the passage read to us from 1 Corinthians.

And I want us to do that for two reasons. Firstly, because of how it ends.Verse 31, 'As it is written, "Let the one who boasts, *boast in the Lord*."' And boasting is about what we celebrate. So if Paul is saying, 'hey, there's a right and a wrong way to celebrate' we should probably pay attention!

But secondly, because of how similar first century Corinth and twenty-first century Lausanne are.

Because just like Lausanne, Corinth was an international crossroads. I mean, why are you here in Lausanne? Because you grew up here, or you came to study, or to work, or because of sport. And Corinth was this thriving, cosmopolitan centre of commerce, like here. An international melting pot of people that hosted the Isthmian games, second only to the Olympics, 2000 years before the IOC ever existed.

And so it drew people from around the Roman world who were determined to make it. A city that offered you the chance to get out of life what you wanted. Sounds familiar, doesn't it.

But that melting pot of people found it's way into the church. Because if today we're celebrating our 20th anniversary, Paul started Westlake Corinth 20 years or so after Jesus's death and resurrection, and 4 years in, as he writes this letter, it's struggling with disagreements, over just about every imaginable subject.

And you don't have to be long in Westlake to imagine how that could be true for us, do you? I mean, imagine putting an Englishman, an American, a German, a South African, and a Swiss in a room, and giving them a theological problem to sort. You're going to have a few opinions aren't you. And that's before the Dutchman walks in.

And so then and now, there's got to be some kind of glue that keeps that kind of community together hasn't there? Something greater than our own opinions. And so as Paul begins to deal with their issues, right at the start Paul is saying 'there is a glue that'll do it. Because it all depends on what you're boasting in, what you're celebrating.'

We All Celebrate Something
I'm an Apple Pages man - because it's beautiful and it works and anything with the word Microsoft in it doesn't. But a few weeks back, I sent a document to one of my daughters and she said, 'Dad can't you just send it to me in Word?' And I said 'why would I do that? Word's so ugly, it looks so 2010s'. To which she said, 'No it doesn't.' And I said 'yes it does' and she said, 'you're probably just using some prehistoric version.' And I said, 'no I'm not, what kind of dinosaur do you take me for.' But you begin to wonder, don't you? So I opened up Word and checked what version it was, and let's just say there was a reason it looked like the 2010s.

So last week I decided to update it. And I'm happy to report it's still ugly. But now I had another problem, because all the documents were black. So to prove I'm not a dinosaur, I asked ChatGPT, and it told me I had it in Dark Mode. So I went to preferences to change to Light Mode and down at the bottom there was another option called 'Show your Pride'. Click on it, and it says, 'Celebrate Pride with this special theme, inspired by the colours of the Pride flag.'

And the inhabitants of Corinth would have approved, wouldn't they. Because when it came to sex, they were no dinosaurs. In fact, their libertarian approach to sex coined a whole new verb. And 'to corinthianise' was to freely indulge your sexual desires without shame.

Because what we celebrate, or take pride in, says a whole load about where we get our identity from and what we think is most important in life, doesn't it? And it doesn't have to be sex, and we may not verbalise that pride or fly a literal or metaphorical flag, but there will be something you put your confidence in. Something, to use Paul's terminology, that you boast in. Something that tells you, this is who I am; this is what really matters; this is what success looks like; this is why I don't need to feel insecure and I can lift my head up. Something that when you think about it, it puts a spring in your step, and confidence in your heart, because it energises you.

And read Corinthians, and what becomes obvious is that we don't just take pride and celebrate and boast in things as individuals, we do it as groups, and communities, even as churches. Because it's this thing that says why my group, or my community, has got it, and is right, and better, than others.

So look again at what Paul writes, v31, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." So Paul's not saying, 'don't boast, it's always wrong to boast', he's saying 'get what you celebrate and boast in right.'

The Problem of Celebrating the Wrong Thing

Look at v22, 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.' So Paul homes in on the two things that the people he's writing to would have thought were worth celebrating above everything else.

And for Jews it was signs. Because whether you lived in Judea or Corinth, if you were Jewish your hope was that God would send a deliverer - a messiah - powerful in word and deed - to deliver his people from their enemies. So they were looking for power encounters, and they didn't draw a sharp distinction between the natural and supernatural, so those signs could be political or spiritual or preferably both - because what mattered most was divine power. And when it came, that would be something to celebrate.

The world of the Greco-Roman philosophers was very different, wasn't it? For them, what was to be celebrated and boasted in - was the life of the mind: the rational and the beautiful. And they took a dim view of the embodied, physical life. For them, to pursue and attain wisdom, to be wise, that was what set them apart from barbarians. That was the thing worth celebrating.

Which is why Paul says, '*As it is written*, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."' Because he's quoting the prophet Jeremiah: 'Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord"' (Jer 9:23-24).

So back in Jeremiah's day, what might people be tempted to boast in? Wisdom, power, wealth. The very stuff that if you were swimming in the waters of Corinth, or if you'd been brought up in Jewish or Greco-Roman thinking, you would just naturally think, 'that's the stuff to take pride in.' Which is why in critiquing it Paul writes, v26, 'For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.' The same three categories.

Not a lot changes does it? Because where might we, as individuals, look for our confidence, or identity, or security today, and if you have them, then you've got something to celebrate?

I mean, we might not call it wisdom, but what about getting a reputation for being smarter than anyone else, by getting into that school, or attaining that PhD, or publishing in that journal, or securing that post, that's something to tell others about isn't it? Why? Because it that tells you - and them - you're something.

Or think of power. Because none of us are going to say, 'yeh power really turns me on'… but what tells you you've made it like getting that promotion, or leading that team, or climbing that career ladder, and having more people answering to you?

Or what about wealth? Again, none of us are going to brag about what we take home each month, that would just be crass. But *enjoying* financial success, and wearing the clothes, or driving the car, or travelling the places that prove you've got it - it tells you you can hold your head up, doesn't it? It lets you walk in life with just a bit of a swagger. And of course, if you don't have those things, and it hurts, that *also* tells you the value you place on wealth, doesn't it?

But, fortunately, all of that is a million miles from the life of a local church, isn't it? Because what church ever struggled with the temptations of wisdom, power, and wealth? Maybe the church that Paul is writing to?

And think what we're celebrating: our 20th anniversary and the provision of this building.

But think how the growth of a church, or the acquisition of premises, can become a thing of boasting. Because a church may not get its kicks from the wisdom of ancient philosophers - but might it just be possible for a church to take pride in its teaching ministry, that's its better than others? Or in the fact that it's adopted all the latest, up-to-the minute stuff on leadership; or has all its structures in place and runs like a finely tuned machine?

And sure, there are only a few places around the world where a church exerts real political power, but what about taking pride in the power, the strength, of numbers and numerical growth? Because look how much better we're doing than others.

And obviously, no-one's going to boast about the size of a church's budget - that would be as crass as bragging about your pay-cheque, but wouldn't it be easy to compare facilities and feel a little surge of pride at how well your church is doing.

So look again at how Paul describes such things: v26, these are, he says, 'worldly standards.' And 'worldly' is Paul's shorthand for a way of thinking and living without reference to or, at best, paying lip service to God. Instead, this is about me, and my achievements, my success, and what I can do.

The problem is, life has a way of revealing those things as double-edges swords, doesn't it. Think wisdom and intellectual or academic success is what makes you, then what happens if you *do* get them? What happens if you *do* get into that school, or your paper does get published while your colleague's doesn't? Then pride is going to be your constant and lurking companion. But if you *don't* get them, it'll crush you.

Or think power and climbing the ladder of success is what tells you you've made it, then what happens if your career stalls?

Or think wealth, and what you own, or where you travel, is what means you can keep your head high among your friends, then what happens if, for whatever reason, the money dries up? It'll shake you won't it? But what if the money keeps flowing? Because have you ever noticed what Paul writes to Timothy about the rich in his church? 'As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God… *so that they may take hold of that which is truly life*.' (1 Tim 6:17–19). In other words, you can be living the life that financial success buys, and still be missing out on what is truly life.

And churches aren't immune, are they? Because what if a church prides itself on its teaching ministry, but then a new church opens down the road, and its preaching just has it in a way the old one doesn't? What if it takes pride in numbers and growth stagnates? What if finances and facilities are what tell them 'we are doing ok!' - but giving takes a hit?

So Paul is saying, take pride in this stuff, and it comes at a cost. Because if you get them, you'll become proud. And you might not *physically* go on a Pride march, but in your heart you will. But fail to get them, or lose them, and it'll crush you.

Instead, Paul is saying, there is something far better to boast in. Something much more secure to celebrate.

The Best Place to Boast

Verse 18: 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' And verses 21-24: 'For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God *through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe*. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, *but we preach Christ crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, *Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*.'

So at one and the same time, Paul says, God subverts and fulfils what we think is most important. And he does it through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Because if Jewish thinking valued power, and longed for a man of power, to deliver them from the power of their enemies, God gives them just such a deliverer, crucified in weakness.

And if Greeks celebrated wisdom, and what was rational and beautiful, and longed to escape this embodied life, God displayed his wisdom by saving people through his Son taking on a body, and dying the most ugly of deaths.

So, think power and success, is what makes you, Paul says, look at the power of the cross - where in seeming defeat Christ triumphs over his enemies and puts them to open shame. You want wisdom? Well look at the wisdom of the cross, as God uses a crucified saviour to save us. You want riches and status? Well look at the king of kings who gave up his riches and became poor, who was stripped naked and shamed, that we might become rich and be covered.

And does he do all of that because we've lived lives to boast about? No. It's the opposite. Verses 26-29: 'Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.'

So what can we, what should we celebrate? It's what we're celebrating today. The sovereignty of God, the knowledge of God, and the gospel of God.

Firstly, the sovereignty of God. Verses 27 and 28 again: 'God chose… God chose… God chose.' And today we get to celebrate 20 years of God's faithfulness to us as a church. Not, as Paul says here, because we are so great. Not because we are so wise or strong or wealthy, but because out of his sheer goodness and grace, God chose to shower his grace upon us. As Paul says, in v30, '*Because of him* you are in Christ Jesus.' Because of him, we are saved, because of him we are his people, because of him we exist as a church, because of him he has preserved us.

Earlier on this week, Su and I were having lunch on our balcony, and there was this bird we couldn't see singing beautifully. So I got out my phone, opened my bird app, and it told me it was just a common blackbird. So we looked in the tree, and there he was, Mr Blackbird, singing his heart out.

And maybe you look at your life and you know that by worldly standards, you are nothing special. You're not especially wise, powerful, or wealthy. You're just a blackbird in a world of peacocks. Absolutely, Paul says, but when you know that you are chosen and called by God, and that his choosing of you does not depend on your achievements, but on his grace, then like Mr Blackbird you have something to sing about - you have something to celebrate - as an individuals and as a church.

And understanding the sovereignty of God is incredibly protective - as individuals and as a church. Because it tells us: any success we enjoy is not down to us - it's down to God. And that should profoundly humble us, without crushing us. And it gives us something to celebrate without getting proud.

And think what we called this whole building project: Gather, Grow, and Go. And out of his grace he has made us his people, so we gather as his people, in this building, as a testament to his sovereign faithfulness.

But secondly, "Let him who boasts boast in this, *that he understands and knows me,* that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

And Paul calls the gospel, the message of Christ's cross, 'the power of God', because it's there that God's steadfast love and justice meet. Because it's there that our sin is counted to Christ and his righteousness counted to us. That however much we fail to meet the 'worldly standards,' however much we make foolish rather than wise decisions, or are weakness in the face temptation, or display the poverty of our own resources in the face of life's troubles - we can know God - that he loves us and that love is steadfast.

And we undertook this whole building project so we could grow. Not just numerically, but in our knowledge of the God of steadfast love, justice and righteousness. The God of Christ crucified. So boast about that, Paul is saying. Celebrate the fact that God is that kind of God.

But thirdly, and finally, look again at who he calls and chooses: v26, 'For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.' And as one commentator points out, 'not many' does not mean 'not any.' Which means God calls to himself people who are not particularly intellectual, and those who are. It means he chooses people who no one in the world would point at and say, 'they are so successful' and some who are. It means he saves people who are struggling financially and those who have more than enough.

Either way, through the gospel of all that Christ has done for us, he chooses people no one else would choose. He calls people no one else would think was the kind of person he would call.

So if you're here this morning and you're suspicious of this whole Christianity thing - it's people just like you he has this habit of choosing. Because read the Bible and he repeatedly chooses the younger brother who everyone else overlooks, not the older brother everyone else admires. He chooses the left-handed man over the right handed. He chooses the less attractive woman over the beautiful one, and the barren and the elderly over the young and the fertile.

And we're here to gather and to grow. But we're also here to go. For this place to be a launch pad, to go into the world with the good news of the gospel. So as you go into your workplace tomorrow - you can do so with huge confidence. And we can talk about what we've got up to yesterday and today, or any Sunday. And we can tell people about the hope and help we've found in Christ. Not because we think we are so persuasive, or that everyone's going to like it, or respond at all, but because we know that God calls the most unlikely people to himself.

So, as we feast together in a moment - celebrate, boast in, the sovereign faithfulness of God, and the knowledge and the gospel of God. In a God who would send Christ for us. In a king who would die to make us his people, so that we can gather in his name, grow in his knowledge and go with his gospel into a world which needs to discover the best thing to boast in.